

Gujarat announces new rules for foreign travellers amid Omicron variant concerns

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Amid the concern over the new variant of coronavirus, the Gujarat government has mandated RT-PCR testing for travellers landing at the airport from Europe, the UK, Brazil, South Africa, Bangladesh, Botswana, China, Mauritius, New Zealand, Zimbabwe, and Hong Kong.

Yesterday, the government resumed scheduled international flights to and from India from December 15 after 20 months of coronavirus-induced suspension. However, the countries deemed 'at risk' of Covid-19 by the Union Health Ministry will be allowed to operate 50% of their scheduled passenger flights.

The Health Ministry said the countries in Europe, including the United Kingdom, and South Africa, Brazil, Bangladesh, Botswana, China, Mauritius, New Zealand, Zimbabwe, Singapore, Hong Kong and Israel have been put in the 'at-risk' category.

India's decision to resume scheduled international passenger flights has come at a time when various countries such as US, UK, Canada Germany, Singapore, Israel, France and Italy have restricted air travel from southern Africa where a new coronavirus variant has been reported.

Further, the Centre said that if a country has been identified in the 'at-risk' category and does not have an air bubble agreement with India, then a maximum "50% of bilateral capacity entitlements or 50% of pre-COVID operations of Indian or foreign carrier, whichever is higher", will be permitted.

If a country wants to operate scheduled passenger flights to another nation, a bilateral air services agreement has to be negotiated to decide how many airlines, ports of entries and total flights (or seats) weekly can be allowed between the two.

The Aviation Ministry said if a country has been identified to be 'at risk' of COVID-19 but has an air bubble agreement with India, then "75% of pre-COVID scheduled international flight operations of Indian or foreign carrier, whichever is higher, or a minimum of seven frequencies per week subject to availability of entitlements under bilateral agreements will be permitted".

The countries that are not in the 'at-risk' category will get "full capacity entitlements according to the bilateral air service agreements", the Aviation Ministry noted.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, scheduled international flights have been suspended in India since March 23 last year. However, special passenger flights have been operating since July last year under air bubble arrangements with 31 countries.

Under an air bubble agreement between the two nations, airlines of both countries can operate special flights between their territories with certain restrictions.

India has air bubbles with Afghanistan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Canada, Ethiopia, Finland, France, Germany, Iraq, Japan, Kenya, Kuwait, Maldives, Mauritius, Nepal, Netherlands, Nigeria, Oman, Qatar, Russia, Rwanda, Seychelles, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Ukraine, the UAE, the UK, the USA and Uzbekistan.

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